

Unit 1, Equality in Action

Meeting 1, Get the Principle

Meeting Summary

This unit is comprised of one meeting.

After a short icebreaker, students define equality and investigate ways they are and are not equal. After discussing the meaning of equal rights and equal access, they brainstorm a **Way We Work** contract, which is a list of ways they'd like to be fairly treated in the group.

Key Points

- ★ The principle that “all men are created equal,” as set forth in the Declaration of Independence, continues to be interpreted and perfected.
- ★ Equal rights sound great in principle, but aren't always easy to achieve in reality - on societal and personal levels.

Preparation and Materials

- ★ Familiarize yourself with the unit, being sure to read through the **Historical and Legal Background** section at unit's end.
- ★ Write the five **First Names** questions on the board or newsprint.
- ★ Photocopy one **Equality Checklist** for every two students.

Vocabulary

Equality
Contract

Diversity
Community

Equal rights

Activities

First Names: Icebreaker

- ★ Students work in pairs or triads. Introduce and explain the activity:
Let's take a few minutes to break the ice and get to know one another. Let's start at the very beginning, with our names. Each person, take two minutes to tell your partner about your first name. Consider a few questions.
- ★ Ask someone to read down the list of questions on the board/newsprint:
 - 1) Were you named after or for anyone?
 - 2) Do you like your first name?
 - 3) If you could change your name, what would you change it to?
 - 4) Do you have a nickname?
 - 5) What would you like to be called in this group?
- ★ After student pairs conclude their discussion, invite partners to introduce one another, saying a few things about each other's names.
- ★ Hand out name badges and ask students to write down the name they'd like to be called in the group.

Equality: Brainstorm

- ★ Write the word **equality** on the board.
What does equality mean? Let's come up with as many ideas as possible.
- ★ Compile a list of student answers.

A Working Definition

- ★ In what class do you talk most about equality? Prompt, if needed: How about math class?
- ★ Draw an "equals" sign (=) on the board.
In mathematics, numbers are equated through clear-cut equations such as $2+3 = 5$. Numbers can be strictly equal in value. But what about people? Can David = Marcus?
- ★ Ask students to pair up and take one minute to figure out in what ways, if any, they are "equal." Hand out the **Equality Check List** to help prompt students' thinking. Encourage them to add to the list.

- ★ Go around the room and ask pairs to share at least two things they share in common and at least two ways they differ. Can any two people be absolutely “equal” in a strict sense? What about identical twins?

Teaching Point: Don’t shy away from talking about similarities and differences in social class. For example, “Do your families earn similar incomes? Do you live in similar kinds of neighborhoods?”

- ★ Concluding question. Which list is longer, similarities or differences? Point out that in the world, just as in this group, there is great diversity among people.

Equal Rights and Fairness: Short Discussion

- ★ Draw a distinction between equalizing in mathematics and the principle of **equal rights**:

Just because someone is different than we are – tall or short, able-bodied or disabled, black or Hispanic or white, male or female – does that give us the right to treat them differently? Why or why not?

Everyone – regardless of our individual differences – has equal rights guaranteed to us by law. Under law, we all have the right to equal opportunity, equal access and equal treatment. Can anyone explain what this actually means?

- ★ Prompts, if needed:

- 1) If you are a certain race or ethnicity, can you be denied the right to take a public bus or train, or to sit wherever you want once you get on? (**We are guaranteed equal access by law to public transportation.**)
- 2) Let’s say you are physically disabled, or that you are gay, or that you have a learning disability. Can you be shut out of school? (**The law guarantees all children equal access and opportunity to education.**)
- 3) Can you be denied housing simply because you are Muslim, or Jewish, or Sikh, or atheist?

- ★ “How about in reality?” Ask students to explain:

Raise your hand if you agree. “People are treated fairly all the time, despite their differences.”

- ★ Sample segue:

American law decrees that you can’t be treated unfairly based on age, sex, gender, race or ethnicity, religious affiliation, and so on. Of course, we know that, in fact, people often get treated unfairly and treat one another unfairly. Our system of government (including the justice system) holds the promise of equality, but we haven’t

done a perfect job of bringing that into reality. Equality and fairness are a work in progress on both societal – and personal – levels.

- ★ “How about you?” Pose a list of questions for students to consider quietly to themselves. After completion, ask if anyone would like to comment.
 - 1) How do I treat people who are different than me?
 - 2) Do I treat all people fairly?
 - 3) What about kids younger than me?
 - 4) What about family members and siblings?
 - 5) What about unpopular kids?
 - 6) Do I give someone a chance, even if they are different? Why or why not?

The Way We Work: Group Contract

- ★ Sample introduction:

We may not be able to eliminate all the unfairness in society in the next 10 sessions, but there’s one thing we can do. Let’s make sure that equal rights and fairness happen here, in our group. This is our own world for 10 weeks. What kind of society do we want to create together? We may not all be the same, but how do we want to work together? Let’s come up with a list of ways we want to be treated – and to treat one another – regardless of our differences.

- ★ Students work in pairs or trios. Pose the following question, allowing students several minutes to discuss and write down answers. Encourage each group to come up with at least five items.

Think about the many groups and communities you’ve belonged to – your family, different classes in school, teams and clubs, a church or mosque or synagogue, and so on – and ways you and others have been treated in these communities, fairly or unfairly.

What are some things that you’ve really liked and appreciated about other communities that you’d like to have happen here?

How would you like to be treated here? By me? By others? Let’s come up with a list.

- ★ Prompts, if needed:

- 1) Have you ever been in a group where only one or two people participated? Did you like that or not?
- 2) Have you ever belonged to a group where you had to get permission to go to the bathroom? What did you think of that?

- 3) Have you ever been in a group where you felt comfortable speaking your mind without fear of judgment or punishment?
 - 4) Have you ever been in a group where you had a huge say in things? Did you appreciate that or not?
- ★ Groups report back. Ask each person to weigh in - you, the group leader, included. Compile a master list on the board or newsprint. Congratulate kids for being honest and forthright.
 - ★ Go down the list and let students know which requests are infeasible or non-negotiable based on facility rules, etc.
 - ★ Discuss remaining items, asking if everyone (you too!) agrees on each point. Ask students to explain their opinions and, if needed, help them discuss/compromise/negotiate to come into agreement.
 - ★ Copy a final draft onto a new page of newsprint and ask everyone to sign.
 - ★ Save the page to post at the start of each session.

Unit 1, Meeting 1 – Student Handout

Equality Checklist

Check things you share in common:

	Height
	Age
	Gender
	Race/Ethnicity
	Where you were born
	Town you live in
	Grade in school
	Parents married
	Education level of your parents/guardians
	Language most often spoken at home
	Number of grandparents still alive
	Hair color
	Eye color
	Religion
	Number of brothers and sisters
	Number of people living in your home
	Household pets

Do you like to do the any of the same things outside of school (sports, play an instrument, etc.)?

What is a belief or opinion you share in common?

What are “favorites” you share in common: favorite color, pizza topping, music, TV show, place to get away from everything, etc.?

What other ways you are equal?